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IN GRAMMAR'S FALL, WE SINNED ALL.

BY- TIBBETTS, A.M.

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THROUGH THEIR LOSS OF FAITH IN TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR, MEN HAVE "SINNED" AND CONTRIBUTED SLIGHTLY BUT IMPORTANTLY TO THE CREATION OF AN AMORAL AND RELATIVISTIC SOCIETY. PROMPTED BY THE SIN OF INTELLECTUAL PRIDE, SOME LINGUISTS SEEM TO ASSUME THAT GRAMMATICAL PROBLEMS CAN BE SOLVED BY RATIOCINATION ALONE. IGNORANCE OF THE PAST--ANOTHER SIN--AND IGNORANCE OF THE TRADITIONAL VALUE OF IDIOM HAVE RESULTED FROM THIS ATTITUDE, FURTHER, THE SENSE OF TACT AND OF GOOD TASTE UPON WHICH GRAMMAR DEPENDS FOR ITS LIFE AND STRENGTH HAVE TO A LARGE EXTENT DISAPPEARED FROM AMERICANS' WRITING AND SPEECH. IN THEIR STEAD, THE SINFUL PRACTICE OF SOCIAL LEVELLING HAS PERMEATED SCHOOLS, PERMITTING THE BEST USAGES IN ALL DISCIPLINES TO BE IGNORED IN ATTEMPTING "TO RETAIN THE INTEREST OF STUPID OR LAZY STUDENTS." FEW PEOPLE ARE WILLING TO SET STANDARDS OF LINGUISTIC TASTE. CONSEQUENTLY, THE COMMON EVILS OF PRESCRIPTION--OCCASIONAL OVERSIMPLIFICATION AND OVERSTATEMENT--HAVE BEEN SUCCEEDED BY THE GREATER EVIL OF PERMITTING STUDENTS TO PROGRESS THROUGH SCHOOL WITHOUT RECEIVING THE TRAINING NECESSARY TO MAKE GOOD GRAMMATICAL CHOICES. ALTHOUGH ANY PRACTICAL GRAMMAR IS SOMEWHAT MAKESHIFT, THE "BEST EVIDENCE OF THE VALUE OF TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR IS THAT IT USUALLY WORKS." (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN THE "ILLINOIS ENGLISH BULLETIN," VOL. 55 (DECEMBER 1967), 1-9.) (RD)

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My Student Wears a Halo

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In Grammar's Fall / We Sinnéd All

BY A. M. TIBBETTS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS, URBANA

I might as well begin by admitting that I am a traditionalist in grammar. Perhaps I should also admit that I am only a rhetorician, not a professional grammarian, a fact which allows me to be rather more dogmatic than most professionals would dare to be. As Mark Twain wrote in his *Autobiography* (New York, 1924, I, 173), "I like the exact word, and clarity of statement, and here and there a touch of good grammar for picturesqueness. . . ." Like Twain, I do not always love the purists. Twain attacked a reviewer whose grammar he called "foolishly correct, offensively precise":

> Even this reviewer, this purist, with all his godless airs, has made two or three slips. At least, I think he has. I am almost sure, by witness of my ear, but cannot be positive, for I know grammar by ear only, not by note, not by the rules. A generation ago I knew the rules—knew them by heart, word for word, though not their meanings—and

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A monograph on new approaches to the study of language by Dr. Katharine O. Aston appeared in the November BULLETIN. *The treatment in this* BULLETIN *by* DR. TIBBETTS *is traditional. We invite you to read together the two issues on this controversial subject of language instruction, to react to them, and to write your comment to the Editor.*

Those of you who have been concerned with the reliability and objectivity of your theme-grading will be interested in the report of Colonel Clark on a theme grading experiment at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado. If you haven't tried the experiment he outlines, you might want to.

> I still know one of them: the one which says — which says — but never mind, it will come back to me presently. This reviewer even seems to know (or seems even to know, or seems to know even) how to put the word "even" in the right place; and the word "only," too. I do not like that kind of persons. I never knew one of them that came to any good. A person who is as self-righteous as that will do other things. I know this, because I have noticed it many a time. I would never hesitate to injure that kind of a man if I could. When a man works up his grammar to that altitude, it is a sign. It shows what he will do if he gets a chance; it shows the kind of disposition he has; I have noticed it often. I knew one once that did a lot of things. They stop at nothing (*ibid.*, pp. 173-174).

Twain would have enjoyed the story of the grammarian, Dominique Bouhours, who indeed stopped at nothing. Bouhours was lying on his death bed, in which place he should have been contemplating the state of his soul. But just before he expired, he uttered these immortal last words: "I am about to — or I am going to — die: either expression is used."[1]

Are not these the words of a fanatic? Surely there are things more important than grammar, and a man should leave this world with more than grammatical sins on his mind. Yet everything in this world is related to everything else. Grammatical errors and mistakes in using words have been known to change history, from over-throwing court verdicts to causing misunderstandings between allies in wartime. And what do we mean by *grammar*? How can we apply the term to so many different things, to problems of word-choice, sentence construction, verb form, and so on? Are we not using the term too loosely and mixing problems of grammar with, for example, those of rhetoric?

The answer is, yes, the fault is there. It cannot be wished or talked away. The grammarian who tries to deal with language in any total sense finds himself wearing a tattered coat of many colors and fabrics. Sometimes he dresses himself as a rhetorician; sometimes as a social commentator; sometimes as a moralist; occasionally even as a theologian. Once in a while, he may not know what he is dressed as, or what part he is playing. This is true even when he is trying hardest to be a "pure" grammarian; for, as Jesperson wrote in 1909, "one may observe how each linguistic phenomenon inevitably presents blurred outlines, perfectly sharp delineations being found rather in our imperfect attempts to interpret nature than in nature itself. In a language everything is linked together with everything else. . . ." (*A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* [London, 1961], I, v).

[1] *Dictionary of Last Words*, ed. Edward S. Le Comte (New York, 1955), p. 28.

A major value of traditional grammar was that it allowed the grammarian to play several roles at once and to be magisterial about all of them. He was not only a force in the schools, but also an important man in society. As an authority, he helped in his own way to provide those standards of morality, taste, and intelligence without which a society declines and perhaps eventually falls. The decay of traditional grammar contributed in a small but important fashion to the creation of the amoral and relativistic society in which we live. To put it in ancient Christian terms, we have sinned, and we are now paying for our sins.

It is so unfashionable to speak in such terms that I suppose I should issue a parenthetical apology. I feel a little like C. S. Lewis, who was asked by a friend how he came to write philosophical articles for the *Saturday Evening Post.* "Oh," said Lewis, "they have somehow got the idea that I am an unaccountably paradoxical dog, and they name the subject on which they want me to write; and they pay generously." "And so [said the friend] you set to work and invent a few paradoxes?" "Not a bit of it. What I do is to recall, as well as I can, what my mother used to say on the subject, eke it out with a few similar thoughts of my own, and so produce what would have been strict orthodoxy in about 1900. And this seems to them outrageously paradoxical, *avant garde* stuff" (*Light on C. S. Lewis,* ed. Jocelyn Gibb [New York, 1965, p. 64]).

If you have trouble accepting the idea of a religious atheist (myself) speaking to you of sin and damnation, of grammatical right and wrong, I suggest you consider me not as a reactionary but as a paradoxical purveyor of a new theory, a wild-eyed member of the *avant garde* and therefore entirely acceptable to all right-thinking intellectuals.

To return to our subject. How exactly do men sin when they lose their faith in traditional grammar? The first sin is the chief of all sins, *pride* — in this case, intellectual pride. The non-traditional grammarians often seem to believe that their minds are so powerful they can solve grammatical problems simply by ratiocination. So deep is their common disrespect for the concrete and specific in grammatical situations that one expects them to echo the social scientist who asked lugubriously: "That works out fine in practice, but how does it check out in theory?" In their excessive interest in theory, they often ignore the traditional value of idiom. Take, for example, the argument about double nouns, or nouns misused as adjectives, over which misuse a recent controversy occurred in the *Times Literary Supplement.* In answering

a rather traditional grammarian who objected to the double noun, one writer claimed that "they are no innovation; Jane Austen made free use of them. In the first few pages of *Pride and Prejudice,* for example, may be found *gravel walk, militia regiment, market town, parlour window,* and *lottery tickets. . . .*" Another writer agreed, pointing out that the multiple noun is not a vice but a natural development illustrating "the virility of a language continually adapting itself to specialist situations and technical change" (*TLS* [Sept. 16, 1965, p. 812]).

These two commentators are stuck so deep in their theory that they fail to understand the specific nature of the problem, which is not so much one of historical philology or linguistic virility as one of English idiom. *Gravel walk* has been acceptable for hundreds of years, a good example of linguistic stability and of the fact that the language does *not* "continually adapt itself." So unsure is the second theorist of specific idiom that he can create a phrase like *specialist situations* and feel unembarrassed when he makes the very error in idiom he says does not exist.

Such grammarians do not so much use the past as ignore it, which is another sin. We have made a false god of Change, forgetting that in the grammatical arts there is little that is new and that good reasons should be required for changes. In looking to the future we have forgotten how much the past has shaped us. As H. W. Fowler said of the Latin influence on English grammar: "Whether or not it is regrettable that we English have for centuries been taught what little grammar we know on Latin traditions, have we not now to recognize that the iron has entered into our souls, that our grammatical conscience has by this time a Latin element inextricably compounded in it, if not predominant?"[2] Moreover, when we ignore the past, we tend to forget it and create about it fairy tales and myths full of imaginary pedantic monsters, authoritarian grammatical Grendels yelping SPLIT INFINITIVE! and NO PREPOSITION AT END!

A greater understanding of the past might have helped us to avoid the peculiarly modern sin now being vigorously committed in both England and America, that of *social levelling,* the bad results of which should teach us (if nothing else does) that many grammatical questions are inevitably social questions. There was a time when a slum child could attend his local slum school, educate himself, lift himself out of the slum, and become a useful, literate citizen. The school demanded only that he learn how to

[2] Quoted by Sir Ernest Gowers, *H. W. Fowler: The Man and His Teaching* (Oxford, 1957), p. 11.

live in a civilized society, which included learning how to speak and write its language.

Today, particularly in the United States, the practice of social levelling has permeated our schools, and the best usages in all disciplines tend to be ignored in a pitiable attempt to retain the interest of stupid or lazy students. No longer can the ambitious slum child escape his environment. He carries it with him into the school, where teachers cringe before small mobs of delinquents. Even in the better schools, like the high school in my university town, teachers work on the theory that the poor students must be retained — and so they are kept through junior high, through high school, and finally appear dull-eyed and miserable, in a freshman English class at one of the state colleges.

Nearly everywhere in our school system, we tend to level down to the worst. I teach a required course in English grammar at the University of Illinois. The students and I sail contentedly along in the course, studying the various grammars of the past and present until they meet their first high-school classes as student teachers. Then comes the shocked question: "How can you teach grammar to a class of thirty high school sophomores when ten of them can't tell a noun from an adjective?" My answer is — you can't. All you can do is teach the twenty competent students and baby-sit the rest, hoping that no one of the dullards will get bored and angry enough to pull a knife on you.

If a society is to be healthy, if it is going to be more than just a socio-economic device for keeping large masses of men from running amuck and murdering each other, it must be based to some extent on natural social stratification. There have to be (I blush to utter the phrase) "social classes," whose members know where they stand in the scheme of things and what they are to do in life. It is futile to talk of a classless society. There is no such thing. Every attempt to create a classless society has ended up in a dictatorship, with the worst elements on top.

Again, I remind you that these socio-political statements are entirely relevant to a discussion of grammar. If our English grammar is to stay alive and useful, it needs to gain strength from the sense of tact and good taste in the American people. But taste and tact have disappeared to a large extent from both the writing and speech of our people, a partial result of the social levelling we have undergone. We have few persons willing to set standards of linguistic taste. Ironically, when those few try, a dozen professors of the new grammar rise up against them, crying out epithets like *aristocrat.* To which we traditionalists an-

swer: Why not a rule of the best? Doesn't history abundantly show that if you don't work for a rule of the best (and of course you never really attain it) you are likely to get a rule of the worst? Or, perhaps, of the mediocre?

Because we have fallen into the sin of grammatical relativism, we have lost the power to make good grammatical judgments — to *prescribe.* Of all the battles between the new grammarians and the traditionalists, perhaps the battle over prescriptivism has been the most bitterly fought. We traditionalists have been called "moralists" who make "pre-conceived" grammatical judgments. It is time that we stopped being the villains of this war and point out to friends and enemies alike that man by nature is a moral animal. He can no more stop making moral distinctions than he can stop breathing.

A short while ago, I overheard a relativist (we'll call him Professor X) berating a traditionalist for his "black-and-white attitude toward everything." A few days later, Professor X could be seen in a group of Viet Nam demonstrators carrying a sign that read: "The Viet Nam War is *evil*!" Thus does the anti-moralist moralize. He says that he hates preconceived moral judgments, an attitude which in itself is a preconceived moral judgment. And then he goes out and makes a strong moral judgment in public without recognizing the violent contradiction between his principles and his practice.

As we are all naturally moralists, we are naturally prescriptivists. In order to prescribe, we indulge in grammatical *negative criticism.* Now it is most unfashionable these days to be negative. We have gotten stuck in an either-or fallacy: one has to be either "negative" or "positive." To be negative is bad; to be positive is good. But only through both negative and positive logic can we accurately test the value of ideas. As John Stuart Mill stated in his essay, "On Liberty," it is "negative logic which points out weaknesses in theory or errors in practice, without establishing positive truths. Such negative criticism would indeed be poor enough as an ultimate result; but as a means to attaining any positive knowledge or conviction worthy the name, it cannot be valued too highly; and until people are again systematically trained to it, there will be few great thinkers, and a low general average of intellect, in any but the mathematical and physical departments of speculation" (Oxford, 1924, p. 56).

The traditional grammarian prescribes in two ways. He sets up models of grammatical excellence, and he lists certain grammatical errors to be avoided. He prescribes both positively and

negatively, and in order to make these prescriptions clear he occasionally oversimplifies and overstates. This is a common evil in any form of prescription. But the evil in not prescribing is worse, for without prescription the student (unless he is gifted or has a very good ear) goes through school without being grammatically trained or taught how to make grammatical choices.

The best evidence of the value of traditional grammar is that it usually works. The student is asked to make choices in syntax, diction, idiom, and so on until he is trained to make the proper choices on his own. He is admonished both positively and negatively; he is rewarded and punished. He is given a great deal of practice. If he cannot perform up to a firmly set grammatical standard, he is not promoted to the next grade. Of course this method of teaching has not been widely used in the United States for forty or fifty years. Grammatical permissiveness has been the rule, and clearly it has not worked. After many courses in high school English, our college students cannot write, and most college graduates use the language in an awkward, left-handed fashion.

I am not talking about students' failing to know the famous rules about *who* and *whom* or *shall* and *will*. These matter hardly at all. Rules about such petty points can be memorized, if one wishes to remember them. I am talking about the fact that, through lack of training, students cannot use their own language well enough to express their ideas clearly. My university takes freshmen from the top quarter of their high school classes. Yet I find that a freshman at Illinois can write like this:

> Of all the intelligent people I had the opportunity to meet, can be classified into three distinct types. The first of these is a person with a high intelligence toward academic studies, but has no cognition of current affairs. The second type also possess a knowledge of academic studies, but unlike the first, he has a fair acquaintance with current events. The third classification is a person who possess an outstanding knowledge of academic subjects, and also is well acquainted with current happenings.

What causes a student to abuse the language in this fashion? Probably his grade- and high-school teachers did not make him practice putting ideas into idiomatic English. I am assuming that he had sufficient intelligence to learn. What he needed was drill, drill, drill — not just in the grammatical forms but also in the expression of ideas in correct and logical English idiom. As a result of his faulty training, the poor fellow now has an eighteen-year-old body and a ten-year-old mind. He can't make himself understood on any subject, not even orally, except by mumbles and grunts.

The new grammarians have often told us that young children know their "grammar." True, they can ask for food. They can express anger, joy, relief, pleasure; but they can communicate no more than simple ideas, partly because they lack experience and maturity but more importantly, for our discussion here, because they cannot handle the complex interrelationships between thought and idiom. Unless they are trained as they grow up, most of them never will be able to handle them. They will remain tongue-tied all of their lives.

The major result of our sins in forgetting the values of traditional grammar can be found not only in the colleges or graduate schools — although immediate results can be easily found there — but also in the outside world, in the illogical and unlovely speech and prose of Americans in all walks of life. Listen to the politician or the housewife. Read the letters to the editor in your newspaper, the contract your lawyer draws up when you sell your house, or the instructions that come with your new kitchen appliance. We are choking ourselves with bad grammar, with grammar so inefficient that some of us make sense only by accident.

Ironically, we are proud of our American language. We claim that it is slangy and vivid, but we forget that most slang is verbal noise which is no more *precise in meaning* than rock and roll music. You can feel in slang but you can't usually think very well in it, as one of my students discovered to her sorrow this year when I asked her what Dryden thought of Shaftesbury. Said she: "Dryden was, like, not exactly ape over him." When I asked her to translate that into English, she fluttered her hands in defeat. Poor girl! And to which of *your* children will this young lady some day teach English?

Perhaps I should conclude with another admission. Although I believe that we have lost our grammatical souls — and with them perhaps our intellectual souls as well — I do not really believe that the study of traditional grammar alone will save us from sin. We traditionalists are human and therefore fallible. If we had not originally committed the sin of pride and allowed our grammatical discipline to become in some ways intellectualized and irrelevant to human needs, the new grammarians would never have found our weaknesses and proceeded to kill us off. Also, any grammar, and this includes traditional grammar, is a codification; and all codifications are somewhat inaccurate and sometimes loosely connected to the main purpose of language, which is thinking. No practical grammar is more than a wretched makeshift.

What we need in the schools today is the study of traditional

grammar — *and* rhetoric, *and* ethics. *And* traditional subject matters of many kinds. We cannot live well in the future unless we know how to draw on the past, which teaches us that fashions change while sinful human nature does not. The Fall of Man is more than just a metaphor. And if we tell ourselves to go forth from this day forward and commit no more grammatical sins or crimes, let us go forth remembering the excellent advice of J. N. Hook and E. G. Matthews, who stated that "the crimes in language" are usually not improprieties but "lack of clarity, obscenity, lies, and half truths." (*Modern American Grammar and Usage* [New York, 1956, p. 269]).